

## Experiences with and Reflections about an Intercultural Practical Course<sup>1</sup>

### The very beginning ...

Within the framework of IMPACCT, a new type of course had to be developed to fulfil the requirements of the project with regard to internationalisation as well as intercultural and interreligious issues. Therefore, the author conceived a course named “The Intercultural Dimension in the Didactics of Islamic Religious Education”, which she offered from 2020–2022. In terms of the participants in this first phase, predominantly students from the chair of Islamic Theology and its Didactics took part, whereas somewhat later a few students of ethics participated as well. At that time, all of the students were strongly motivated and eager to have their international mobility stay at one of our partner universities, with participation in the practical course being compulsory for them. Due to the Covid pandemic and its travel restrictions, there were no incoming students from our partner universities. Our own (outgoing) students could not realise their mobility stay either, except for one student, who managed to go to Fribourg University in Switzerland for a couple of months.

In those years, the language used in the course was German, as is usual with the majority of lectures and seminars at Justus Liebig University Giessen. The goals of the course were concretely defined as following:

- Prepare the outgoing students for their mobility stay.
- Sensitise them with regard to intercultural and interreligious challenges during their mobility stay.

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1 This is kind of course, called *Übung* in German, at Justus Liebig University Giessen has a mainly practical approach to give students a sense of the conditions and challenges in their future professional lives.

- Widen the horizons of all participating<sup>2</sup> students with regard to the conditions in other countries.
- Prepare all the students with regard to the “heterogeneous classroom”, which they will probably work in during their teaching careers.
- Sensitise them with regard to intercultural and interreligious challenges which might occur during their teaching practice.

The practical course was offered within the framework of *Module 3: Islamic Religious Education and Teaching Methodology*. In order to implement the overarching goals of the practical course’s curriculum, it was essential to consider the two fields of competencies and content. The following examples elucidate the competencies intended to be fostered through the practical course:

The students

- can explain and define the content and competency goals of Islamic religious education within the context of the general educational goals of primary schools.
- can develop and plan religious learning processes for religious education in schools, taking into account the day-to-day realities of children, their upbringing and (developmental) psychological learning prerequisites, and their theological expertise.
- are able to analyse and evaluate media, materials and methods in Islamic religious education from a teaching perspective.
- know the curricula of Islamic religious education in primary schools, can assess them and have planning strategies for their implementation.
- know non-school settings in Islamic religious education and religious learning and can understand their significance for Islamic religious education at school.

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2 From the 2nd semester of the project onwards, non-IMPACCT students from the chair were also accepted to take part in the practical course. In this way, they were provided with a profound insight into the required topics and issues, which enabled them to experience a kind of “mobility at home” and have “a look outside the box”.

- can identify and develop subject-based and general teaching perspectives for interdisciplinary lessons (religious education project work in schools).<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the course being part of module 3, also the following competency of *Module 2, Religious Practice Past and Present* was considered essential in order to provide the students with a deeper insight into and understanding of intercultural and interreligious issues. “The students [...] can understand, reflect on and describe the interaction between Islamic and European culture and religions.”<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the content of module 3, the following aspects served as guidelines for conceiving the practical course:

- intercultural, interdenominational and interreligious dimensions of Islamic religious teaching and religious education
- significance of upbringing and the (developmental) psychological learning prerequisites of children for learning Islamic religion at school
- pedagogical and theological rationale for Islamic religious education in ideologically neutral schools
- media, materials and methods of Islamic religious teaching
- non-school settings for Islamic religious education and religious learning
- comparison of religious education concepts, learning concepts and teaching methodology<sup>5</sup>

To complete the range, again some aspects of module 2 contributed to the requirements of the practical course, such as:

- the main aspects of Islamic history from its beginnings to Islam in contemporary Europe
- Muslim religious practice
- Muslim festivals and Muslim lifestyle and food<sup>6</sup>

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3 In this article, the author uses an internal translation of the practical course's curriculum into English. For the original see: [https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fb04/institute/islamische-theologie/studium-und-lehre/modulbeschreibung-islamische-theologie\\_l1-vor-22-03-2012.pdf/view/L1](https://www.uni-giessen.de/de/fbz/fb04/institute/islamische-theologie/studium-und-lehre/modulbeschreibung-islamische-theologie_l1-vor-22-03-2012.pdf/view/L1) – Appendix 2 – Islamic Religion Modules As amended by Decision No. 4/10 July 2013.

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*

6 Internal translation of the practical course's curriculum into English.

Based on the above-mentioned prerequisites, the content of the practical course consisted of the following three parts:

### 1. *Intercultural aspects in Islam*

This part included an overview about the historical and theological backgrounds like *Muslim traces—past and present—in European history* as well as the main Islamic sources (*Qur'an, Hadeeth*) and examples from the Prophet's biography.

### 2. *Insight into Muslim life and Islamic Education in the partner countries of the IMPACCT project*

Besides some basic knowledge about Austria, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey, the situation and living conditions of Muslims in those countries were of core interest. Aspects like:

- the position of Muslims in society (official, experienced/felt ...), according to keywords like
- *recognised/respected/tolerated/discriminated/oppressed...*,
- participation in society and social commitment,
- structures within the Muslim community/communities like *self-organisation, prayer*
- *opportunities, youth work, etc.*

served as an occasion for and orientation in lively discussions between the students.

Specific questions were assumed to be useful in honing the focus on religious education in the partner countries, such as:

- What model of religious education is being implemented in the partner countries
- (denominational, non-denominational ...)?
- Who offers these lessons?
- Where do the teachers come from (from the country itself, “imported teachers” from abroad)?
- How are teachers trained?
- What lesson content is taught?
- What teaching materials are available in the partner countries?

### 3. *Didactic approach*

This part of the course aimed to dive deeper into the intercultural and interreligious aspects of Islamic religious education. For this

purpose, it was essential to reflect on the subject's curricula according to the different school types. The students were given an array of schoolbooks and media, developed in Germany or in some of the partner countries, to be analysed according to general didactic as well as intercultural and interreligious criteria. Thus, the group was prepared to compare and discuss their different pedagogical and didactic concepts. The planning of lessons completed the other fields and enabled the students to reflect deeply, consider arguments and develop visions of how to create attractive and interesting lessons with a special focus on intercultural and interreligious issues. An integral part of all of these was reflecting on one's own religious background, the grade of one's religiosity, the importance of religion for one's own lifestyle, traditions, country of one's family's origin, etc.

### The change ...

From 2023 to 2024 the IMPACCT project continued by widening the range of students. For this reason, the practical course's frame and content had to be adapted to the new conditions. Therefore, it was named "The Intercultural Dimension in the Didactics of Religious Education and Ethics Instruction". Interestingly, in this phase most of the participants were students of Ethics and Protestant/Catholic theology, whereas only a few students of Islamic Theology attended the course. A real turning point was the participation of incoming students.<sup>7</sup> Now, English and, in cases of necessity, Turkish were added to German as the (unofficial) languages used in the course to enable the students to follow the lessons.

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the incoming students were IMPACCT students, some of them Erasmus students who in the same manner were obliged to attend the intercultural course. All of these students came from Turkish universities.

## Goals and content

The rough structure of the course remained in parts as before to guarantee the continuity of the core aspects. Nevertheless, it also had to be widened through the Christian and the non-religious perspectives to provide all of the students with other perspectives and to facilitate deep exchange of thoughts and experiences between them. For this reason, the topic “Intercultural Aspects of Christianity and Ethics” was added. In the same manner, the analysis of teaching materials and media now included not only the materials of Islamic religious education, but also of Catholic religious education, Protestant religious education and ethics instruction. Two virtual workshops, held by Prof. Dr Jenny Berglund from Stockholm University in 2023<sup>8</sup> and by Prof. Dr Bülent Senay from Bursa University in 2024<sup>9</sup>, contributed to the students being able to “look outside the box” and enriched the course through the lively insights they offered into both the Swedish and Turkish perspectives.

## Feedback and Challenges

Throughout both phases of the project, all the students appreciated gaining new perspectives and widening their horizons. They liked getting insights into the other countries with their different cultures, religions and world views. It became obvious that reflecting on the conditions of religious and non-religious lifestyles in the respective countries in comparison with the situation and one’s own lifestyle in Germany brought forth new insights regarding the well-known environment of the students. This deeper reflection enabled the students to hone their views and critical thinking as well as to discuss issues in more varied ways. The above-mentioned virtual workshops also contributed to these effects and were highly appreciated, which became obvious through the very positive feedback.

Mentioning challenges means having a look at the whole range of circumstances, which may prepare the group to improve and opti-

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8 Title: “Basic Anthropological Considerations for Intercultural and Interreligious work”.

9 Title: “Religious diversity, Islam and Non-Muslims in Turkey”.

mise further proceedings. Due to the wide range of prerequisites<sup>10</sup>, students were very heterogeneous in terms of their prior knowledge about religions and historical developments. For incoming students from Turkey, German as a study language was difficult to master. When they were seated nearby a Turkish-speaking student (buddy), things became much easier for them. Teaching itself became a challenge when switching between the languages was required to a larger extent. Nevertheless, this argument can be weakened slightly due to recent technical developments. Thanks to AI, translating tasks, texts and presentations became much easier than before and made it easier to provide the incoming students with the study materials they needed. Nevertheless, spoken German still remains a challenge for incoming students and does not seem to be something they can master easily.

## Conclusion

Experience shows that from semester to semester and from year to year, the opportunity for intercultural and interreligious exchange in an international environment became increasingly attractive to students. Opening the course to students of other subjects contributed to widening their horizons and to their gaining deep insights into other people's living conditions. Religion and culture were not treated as theoretical concepts but came alive through the students sharing experiences and knowledge. Transferring them into school and teaching practice was and is both a challenge and a promise for the future.

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10 Students being at quite differing phases of their studies.

